

The Blacksmith of Johnnycake Hollow

BY FATHER WILLIAM HODDE

His name was George Adam Klein. His story is typical of so many thousands of 19th century Americans, the children of immigrants. They came searching for a better life, land of their own, freedom from tyranny. They filled eastern cities and flowed westward. They cleared forests, built roads and farms, practiced all the trades necessary for a more comfortable living. They were farmers, stonemasons, carpenters, farriers, storekeepers, and when need be, soldiers.

In the 1830s and later, Catholic Hessians from the region of Hesse Darmstadt, Germany, settled in Portage County, Ohio. Some of them were descendants of Hessian soldiers in the American Revolution, sold by their prince to the British as mercenaries. Many who survived went home and told their families what a wonderful place America was, and some decided to come to America.

Other Germans from Alsace-Lorraine joined them, to become the nucleus of German Catholic congregations of Randolph County. Many of them were formed into St. Joseph Parish in 1831 by Father John Martin Henni, later Bishop of Milwaukee.

Some settled nearby in Rootstown in the parish of St. Peter of the Fields. These, our German forebears, brought their strong Catholic Faith, their deep

faith in Jesus Christ, his church, with its sacraments and way of life. They were of sturdy, hard-working farmer stock, looking for land and independence, which they were denied in their homeland. They found these in America.

George Klein was born in 1867, the son of Adam Klein, whose parents, John and Elizabeth brought him to Ohio about 1837. George's wife, Anna Lansinger, was the daughter of immigrants Adam Lansinger and Nancy Biltz, whose father became a stonemason and bridge builder in Portage County.

Adam Lansinger came in 1858, worked as a farmer, served in the Civil War. His unit was captured by Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest in middle Tennessee. Adam spent several months in the infamous prisoner of war camp at Andersonville, Ga. His health was wrecked, though later he made a precarious living as a farmer to support his family.

George Klein was "rather short in stature, but strong and wiry. He shod the horses and did the metal work for farmers in the area. He was recognized as a good worker and also a bit cranky at times, especially toward the end of a hard day, when the customer would hold the lantern, while he nailed on another shoe or two. He knew his metals, hot or cold, and also the woodwork that went with many of his repair jobs. Boys were thrilled to watch him work, and to

know his gentle and knowing touch with animals." (From "Growing Pains in Johnnycake Hollow" by Albert Paulus. Johnnycake Hollow was a kind of early industrial park in Portage County. The site took its name from the "johnny cake" that most workers ate as a lunchtime staple. It is described as a cake or bread made of cornmeal and water or milk, usually cooked on a griddle.)

Sadly, George Klein died while still in his prime, in 1913, at the age of 46. He was helping to move a schoolhouse, when the building slipped, and he was killed. He had hoped to start the first Ford agency in Portage County. His wife died three years later — very painfully of cancer. They left eight children, one of whom became my mother.

George and Anna's story can be duplicated scores of thousands of times in our country's history. They were admirable people, deeply attached to their Catholic faith. They pioneered the land, built businesses, educated their children, living the strong Catholic family values that have helped to make our country great.

People always look for heroes to admire. We might forget entertainers and sport stars and take a longer look at our own ancestors.

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